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A standing bronze Buddha in Gupta style from the north-western Himalaya

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Bronze statues from the North-West are many, usually about 20 cm in height, with or without mandorla, on cubical or lotus socles, and rarely inscribed. Most of the pieces are collected in the standard publications of U. von Schroeder (1981) and J. Siudmak (2013), which also show that the bronzes become larger with the centuries. Pieces of 40 cm are not rare. One piece was added to the Hirayama collection in recent years, published in an exceptional book (Tanabe 2008: 126; II-31) and in an out-of-the-way catalogue (NN 2013). This piece with its 68 cm height is of medium size, of a high quality and displays a particularly delicate expression. A second piece of equal quality and style will be presented here and compared to the Hirayama statue. As the latter was dated to the seventh century by its editor(s) we will also look for arguments to support or question this date for the new piece. The Hirayama standing Buddha owes a great deal to the Gupta period styles seen in Mathura during the fifth and early sixth centuries, on the other hand the gown is asymmetrically covering only the left arm, a feature common on standing stone statues at Mathura in Kushan times. At the time being nothing permits to assign a homeland for this piece, but it shows stylistic similarities with a new piece from the North-West probably hinting at a dispersal of similarly educated metal casters all over India under political or financial constraints, which, on a trial basis, I link to the upheaval resulting from the inroads of the Huns at the beginning of the sixth century AD.

This new piece was recently seen in a private collection in London; its previous owner had acquired it from the collection of Samuel Eilenberg, then London. It is a standing Buddha in front of an openwork mandorla fixed to his back (figs. 1-2), standing on a bipartite lotus socle. The figure measures 44.8 cm in height, the mandorla is 51.8 cm high and 20.6 cm wide. With these dimensions it surpasses most of the standard statues by its almost doubled size. The lotus base was attached to the figure by a tang under each foot inserted into holes in the base and the tang then split and hammered into a "butterfly" lock. The bronze was analyzed by Pieter Meyers, Los Angeles, for both mandorla and base of the figure. The metal composition for base/mandorla was reported as 95/94 % copper, 3.7/3.0 % tin, 0.65/1.0 % lead, trace/1.4 % zinc and 0.26/0.53 % iron.¹

The body has been cast by the lost wax technique around a clay core, a tiny part of which

¹. A large collection of data through many centuries is contained in von Schroeder (1981: 49-52), none of the samples meets the composition of the London Buddha; the content of zinc is the biggest difference to the Masque Court, with its 18% compared to 1.4 % of the London Buddha, at the most.

was removed and TL dated,² with a resulting wide time-frame from AD 300 to 1000, a range which includes the Gupta era and a number of centuries more, but excludes a modern fabrication.

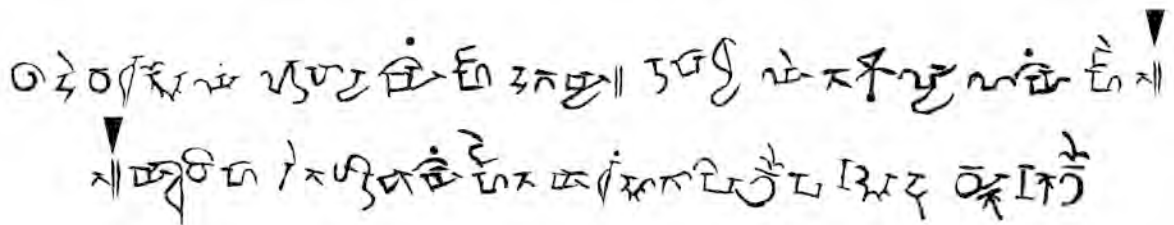
Its size allowed the artist to go into details, giving particular attention to the contemplative expression of the face and the posture of each finger. While the right hand (fig. 3) is raised to signify “safety” (*abhaya*) the left hand holds the hem of the upper garment. The hollow socle is cast in the shape of a lotus bud with eight leaves pointing up and another eight pointing down. Similar lotus seats are dated to the sixth century by von Schroeder (1981: 82f., nos. 5F-5I); unfortunately, the socle of the Hirayama Buddha is lost for comparison.

The mandorla can be removed, being attached to the socle by a tang at its lower end to be inserted into a hole of the socle, while it has a squarish hole, made to receive another tang protruding from the back of the Buddha. Once put in place this perforated tang can be fixed with a splint. This splint went missing.

The lower part of the forehead (fig. 4) has received a small inlay of a stone of red colour for the front jewel, probably a garnet. The white of the half-closed eyes has been rendered by an inlay of silver.

The lower series of leaves of the socle have been inscribed all the round in a variety of Brāhmī based on the Gupta Brāhmī, with closer parallels only in the area from Gandhara and up the Indus. In addition it presents some letter forms which seem to be unique so far, but explicable as arising from more standard forms common in this area, none of them excluding a date around the early sixth century.

The legend starts due left for the onlooker and reads, with the reach of the single leaves indicated by a central dot (·) (fig. 5):



@³ devadhamo yaṃ / · ācāryasiṃṇha·datasya // upādhyā·yena kalyāṇasiṃ·ṇhena //
sādheviḥā·rena śubhasiṃṇhena · sādhaṃ mātāpitrau · pa·ramaduṣkarakatrau

“This is the pious donation of the teacher Siṃhadatta (and) of the preceptor Kalyāṇasiṃha (and) of (his) co-residential (pupil) Śubhasiṃha together with (their) mothers and fathers who performed the most difficult task.”

2. Sample N116j64 of Oxford Authentication, 1 August 2016.

3. It has become customary to call this curl “*siddham*” although no early evidence points towards such a connotation. Instead, the curls in their graphical form are successors of a short horizontal stroke which together with a second stroke at the end of the text frequently frame donative inscriptions in Kushan times. The gold leaves from Śrīkṣetra from late Kushan or early Gupta times use curl and written *siddham* in succession (Falk 1997: 18f.), certainly not as a duplication. The Eran boar inscription turns the @ in a clockwise direction, contrary to how an *i*-bent would run. At some time the @ certainly started to be understood as *siddham*, but this does hardly explain its origins.

It is impossible to decide whether the scribe had the intention to note pre-consonantal *r*- or not. Some *dha* could be *rdha*, as in **sārdhaṃ*, the same applies to *ma* which could be *rma* in *°dharmo*, but there is certainly no *r(tr)*- in **duṣkarakartrau*.

From this simple text it arises that the statue was ordered to be produced by three Buddhist monks, certainly living together in one monastery. How many more monks the monastery held is an open question. The three monks carry names derived from the “lion” by which the victorious Buddha *śākyamuni* can be meant with his “lion’s roar” (*siṃhanāda*) after the many debates won over adherents of other worldviews. Still, such names need not be Buddhist at all, *Siṃhadatta* for one can also be derived from the asterism *siṃha*, our Leo, and as such it is found also in other communities, even Jainistic ones (*sihadata*, *Siṃhadattā*, Bühler 1892: 387f.).⁴ The second name *Kalyānasimha*, the “merciful Lion”, is unique as far as I can see, while the last name *Śubhasimha*, the “auspicious Lion” has already been found hammered into rock as *śubhasigha* at Hodar in the upper Indus valley (von Hinüber in Bandini-König 1999: 300, no. 65: 16). This similarity between the two names can perhaps shed important light on the original source for the bronze.

The three monks are listed in hierarchical order, with an *ācārya* leading, an *upādhyāya* following, and his “co-residential (pupil)” closing.

The orthography is indicative of relatively early times, when *geminata* were not regularly expressed in writing; the seemingly curious *siṃṇha* with its velar nasal derives from an earlier *siṃgha*, and the *anusvāra* before a nasal-initial cluster is common also for other written vernaculars of the time.

Remarkable with regard to paleography are the forms of *sa*, *ṣa* and initial *ā*. *Sa* and *ṣa* are produced by outlining a rectangle or a circle and then adding a short line slanting upwards to the right. The initial *ā* connects all standard lines of a “Karakoram” *ā* (e.g. Hodar 32:4) into a form which can be written in one stretch, without lifting and re-placing the pen, apart from the serif.

The characterization of the parents as “performing the most difficult deed” has a parallel on another bronze Buddha figure of standard size, its legend once read by Raymond Allchin for Neil Kreitman (1992: 217), which I read and translate from the illustration, with slight changes against the printed version:

deyadharmo yaṃ śākyabhikṣo
*buddhapratimā yaśonandina(*h)*
sadhaṃ mātāpitrau paramaduṣkara
*(*kar)trau sadhaṃ upadhāyena*

“This is the pious donation of a statue of the Buddha of the Buddhist monk Yaśonandin, together with his parents, who perform the most difficult task, together with the preceptor (. . .).”

The text is said (Kreitman 1992: 215a) to continue on the adjoining right side of the socle, having become illegible after some repair work; however, most of the meaningful details are given on the front side. Here as well, the term *paramaduṣkara(*kar)trau* refers to the parents. A very similar piece of comparable size (Sachs 2003a, 235/261 no. 213) is likewise inscribed,

⁴ The beautiful catalogue edited by M. Carter (2015: 194, no. 47) on the exhibition at the Al Sabah Museum, Kuwait, shows a silver bowl inscribed in Bactrian. On the underside is a further dotted legend, “unfortunately unreadable”. However, the dots can be read, reading *viṣṇusinhasya* in a Brāhmī of the fifth/sixth century, showing the combination of *-siṃha* with clearly non-Buddhist components.

with mention of “mother and father”, but without the “most difficult task” (Falk 2008: 141).

Two literary parallels come from colophons of texts found at Gilgit. One is the Ajitasena-vyākaraṇa (von Hinüber 2004: 79),⁵ reading:

devadharmo yaṃ bāloṣimhena sārḍhaṃ bhāryājījāḍiena sārḍhaṃ mātāpitrau paramaduṣkaraṭrau
(follow more persons and the scribe).

“This is the pious donation of Bāloṣimha, together with his wife Jījāḍī (?), together with his parents, who perform the most difficult task.”

The second Gilgit text (von Hinüber 2004: 77) is the Bhaiṣajyagurusūtra where the colophon starts with: *tathā sārḍhaṃ mātāpitrau paramaduṣkarakaraṭrau*.

Both colophons are replete with personal names of unknown linguistic extraction, at home in the valleys in or around Gilgit and Hunza, but alien to Gandhara proper.

Formally, there is a difference between *parama-duṣkarṭr* and *parama-duṣkara-karṭr*, but the meaning is not affected, and in all the four cases known so far the term refers to the parents. Which activity is meant by the “most difficult task” may be questioned. Buddhist texts distinguish between the “most difficult tasks” for Bodhisattvas as a life in emptiness (*śūnyatāyāṃ carati*, Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā 20; Vaidya: 185), and for ordinary monks (*muṇḍake śramaṇake*) as attaining *bodhi* (*bodhir hi paramaduṣkarā*, Saṅghabhedavastu, II: 23). The texts mention more and different “most difficult deeds”, even celibacy (*brahma-cāryaṃ*, Saṅghāṭasūtra), but parents occur only once, and without the “most”: According to the Divyāvadāna (Vaidya p. 31) = Avadānaśataka (Vaidya p. 92) they perform a “difficult task” by nurturing, feeding, raising a son, giving the breast and introducing the world to him.⁶ In the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā 12 (Vaidya p. 125) it is the mother alone who performs this task.⁷

The rarity of the expression in literary and epigraphical texts may be due to a rather short period during which the idea of mother or parents “performing a (most) difficult task” was current at all; alternatively, the phrase could have been current over a longer time in a rather limited area. The Avadāna collections, the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā, the name Śubha-simha on a rock in the Indus valley, and the Gilgit colophons with their foreign names speak in favour of regions north of Gandhara and the valleys on the upper Indus. The only open case is the Kreitman Buddha, but with its alleged background in the Hindu Kush (von Schroeder 1981: 64) it can be called “north-Gandharan” as well.

Comparing the scripts on the two Buddhas which mention the “most difficult task” no big difference is found, apart from *sa*, *ṣa* and initial *ā*- where the Kreitman Buddha preserves the standard Gupta style, while the scribe of the London Buddha developed an idiosyncratic form without precedents nor successors, possibly in a sort of clerical diaspora.

When and where was this new statue made? The inscribed but undated Kreitman Buddha

⁵. The two texts are re-read in von Hinüber 2004: 77-79 without touching the topic inherent in *paramaduṣkara-(kara)-karṭr*. Cf. also Schopen (2005: 236 with fn. 33) and (2014: 325).

⁶. *duṣkarakāraṭrau hi bhikṣavaḥ putrasya mātāpitaraṭrau āpyāyakaṭrau poṣakaṭrau saṃvardhakau stanyasya dātārau citrasya jambūdvīpasya darśayitārau*; Schopen (2004: 179) presents the translation of a Tibetan rendering in context.

⁷. *duṣkarakārikaiṣā asmākaṃ jīvitasya dātṛī lokasya ca saṃdarśayitrī*. Oguibénine (gandhari.org → dictionary → MLBS, s.v. *duṣkarakārikā*) refers to the Bhikṣuṇīvinaya (ed. Roth, § 10) for the term; the explanation again refers to one woman alone: *duṣkarakārikā ca bhagavato mahāprajāpatī gautamī āpyāyikā poṣikā janetrīye kālagatāye stanyasya dāyikā* (...).

(28 cm with socle) is given a date of AD 450-550 by von Schroeder (1981: 64); Siudmak (2013: 74) estimates a very similar standing Buddha (20 cm) to the fifth/sixth century as well. Both figures show a row of half-moon folds of their gown from the navel downwards, while the London piece continues these half-moon folds mechanically up to the collar. At least paleography adds more information on a further example with identical design, of 26.5 cm height including square cubical socle, published in the Lattes catalogue (Sachs 2003: 235a, 261, no. 213). Its legend was discovered only after 2003 and published in Falk 2008: 141, the script does not contradict a date in the fifth or sixth century as estimated by Sachs.

This seems to show a consensus regarding the early and smaller types with “Afghan” hairstyle. An earlier date seems also precluded when considering that none of them is inscribed in Kharoṣṭhī script. To assume a later date would presuppose expecting that Sanskrit orthography was still violated by non-expressed geminata e.g. in the seventh century.

Compared to these early types, the Hirayama bronze Buddha (Tanabe 2008: 126, no. II-31) shows some advancement, shared by the London Buddha. The Hirayama Buddha is 68 cm high with mandorla lost,⁸ while the London Buddha measures only 45 cm in height with the mandorla preserved. To understand both bronze statues we have to include some more pieces in a conspectus. The first piece is the so-called Masque Court, an almost life-size mask collected by General Court some place in the Peshawar valley to the West of the Kashmir Smats (Falk 2013). A forth piece akin in many ways is the bronze Brahma from Mīrpur Khās, in Sindh, on the lower Indus, quite large with its 95 cm, but still not as large as the bronze Buddha from Sultanganj, Bengal, now in Birmingham, with its 225 cm (von Schroeder 1981: 216f., no. 45D).

The majority of smaller pieces from Afghanistan and Gandhara have a completely different molding of the face with less stylized features, while the two Buddhas, the Masque Court and the Mīrpur Khās Brahma share a profile with a straight front-nose line. Another link is provided by the brows: The Mīrpur Khās Brahma and the two Buddhas from the Hirayama Collection and from London have their brows not as prominent ridges but as deeply incised lines working with light and shade.

Although the Hirayama Buddha has his right shoulder free and the London Buddha has both shoulders covered, the treatment of the hem of the cloth below the left arm is absolutely identical with a long row of small whirls all the way down.

The hair-style in tiny curls is standard east of Gandhara, but in Gandhara another arrangement in concentric curves without prominent curls is widespread as well. Kreitman (1992: 217a) concluded that Buddhas with hair arranged in concentric curves originated from Afghanistan, while in Gandhara and further east the rows of curls prevailed. Both the London and the Hirayama Buddha show curls, which would put them east of Afghanistan; however, a Buddha from China, dated by an epigraph to AD 486,⁹ and a sitting Buddha from Devnimori in Gujarat, certainly not older than AD 376,¹⁰ show with their concentric rows in “Afghan

⁸. From the published photographs this is not evident. Prof. K. Tanabe was so kind as to contact the Hirayama Museum and received a photograph which shows the perforated tenon in the back, which proves that a mandorla was at least planned, most likely lost in the course of time.

⁹. Metropolitan Museum of Art, acc.no. 26.123, 140 cm high (online); this is probably the piece referred to by Kreitman (1992: 217a) with a superseded date of AD 477, adopted most likely from Snellgrove (1978: 209: fig. 156).

¹⁰. This is the date of 127 years in a *kathika* era, that is probably Kalachuri-Chedi, of a reliquary found inside the same brick stūpa. Williams (1982: 58f.) places the undated Buddha (her pl. 57), carefully encased within

style” that style can only be used with difficulty for fixing boundaries. However, it also shows that the Kreitman Buddha should rather be dated at the lower end of the “fifth to seventh century AD” which Kreitman (1992: 217a) assigns to it.

A better tool for a geographical separation, seemingly of a general nature, is the cordon around the waist indicating the upper end of the under-gown. For the centuries concerned, this line is found only east of Gandhara. Neither the London nor the Hirayama Buddha show it, nor any of the many smaller Buddhas of Gandhara or Afghanistan. The Brahma of Mīrpur Khās with his bare chest naturally shows the winding around the belly. The line is prominent with the Sultanganj Buddha, as it is with another of the rare early dated bronze Buddhas, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art.¹¹ It is 46 cm high and carries a date read as *500-10-3* by G. Vajracharya.¹² Taken in the Śaka era this dates the piece reliably to AD 591.

One further meaningful point seems to have been overlooked so far, that is the left hand. Whatever the type of Buddha and whatever the material, in most cases the left hand holds the hem of the upper garment. While standard statues just grasp it with all fingers at once, a number of the inscribed statues highlighted here uses an unnatural *mudrā*-like posture with little finger and forefinger stretched out, and the central middle and ring finger curved inwards towards the palm where they press down the fabric. In a number of cases only the little finger is stretched out. This mannered *mudrā* can be chronologically fixed, as it is used by the said Cleveland Buddha from Nepal with its date of AD 591. The Brahma from Mīrpur Khās¹³ shows it as do the London and Hirayama Buddhas in an identical form. This way of shaping the left hand is not found on Kushan plastic art, possibly because statues in stone would be liable to lose such isolated fingers. In Gupta stone art it is found at Sarnath on one of the rare inscribed stone statues with a date and preserved left hand, Gupta era 154, that is around AD 474 (Harle 1974; fig. 67); tellingly, the piece has lost most of its little finger. This posture is also found on a standing Buddha from Katra, Mathura, dated in a non-Kushan way at the end of the text, reading *saṃvatsaraḥ 200-10*.¹⁴ If taken as a Gupta date it would amount to ca. AD 530. Half of the little finger is broken away, but the *mudrā* as such is recognizable. The left hand of the huge bronze Buddha from Sultanganj has just the little finger stretched out. Von Schroeder (1981: 216; with p. 207) with good reasons dates it to AD 500-550; other proposals cited range from AD 400 to 850.¹⁵

The delicate fingers of all hands, in particular the mannered posture of the left hand fingers are difficult to produce “free-standing” on small bronzes with the danger that the cavities for the fingers will not be filled properly with the molten metal, or if they do that the fingers are too brittle to withstand wear and tear. In fact, the small (10 cm) “third Buddha”

the brick construction, in between AD 400 and 415.

¹¹ Acc.no. 68.40; Czuma 1970; von Schroeder 1981: 304f., no. 74E; Siudmak 2013: 268, pl. 121.

¹² Published in Slusser 1975/76: 84, 93. Siudmak (2013: 267) cites this interpretation without reference to Slusser and attributes the reading to G. Bhattacharya. For further literature cf. von Schroeder 1981: 304, no. 74E. A clearer case of a comparable *500* is found in Pant [1964]: 13.

¹³ His right hand reverses the *abhaya-mudrā* by showing the outside of the hand to the spectator, a *mudrā* unknown from other pieces.

¹⁴ This has been read as 200-80 (Lüders 1961: 35, fn. 3) or 200-30 (Fleet 1888: 273f. no. 70 with pl. 40D. Williams (1974) tends to put the piece in a transitional phase between Kushans and Guptas and opts for a Kushan date 120+280 = AD 400. The cipher is unique for Mathura, but it is the prototype of the contemporary Lichavi 10 with opening bow and still ending in a C-bend.

¹⁵ This provides a possible low date, while higher dates are not excluded by this *mudrā*, as can be seen in an 11th cent. Buddha from Nālandā (Snellgrove 1978: 282).

(Middleton 2010: 122) from Dhanesar Khera in Banda District (100 km west of Kauśāmbī) shows that the *mudrā* took on a life of its own. It is clearly recognizable although all finger tips broke away. The hand is held empty, with fingers still bent and stretched, without any hem inside the palm.

In consideration of these obvious developments I regard the London and Hirayama bronze Buddhas as representatives or successors of the prototype for the stone Buddhas with similar left hands, and some of these stone Buddhas date to the late fifth and early sixth century.

As this is the same time frame used for the small Afghan Buddhas we see that von Schroeder and Kreitman were perfectly right in keeping the styles of Gandhara and Gupta-influenced areas apart without using one group to date the other.

The rarity of the Gandharan type of large size bronze Buddhas stands in contrast to their beauty. That means there was a highly skilled group of metal casting artists and there were very few customers able or willing to cover the charges. A continuation of the activities of the artists is seen in Nepal, in eastern India and in China. Was it the fiscal oppression put on the population by the Hūna invasions in Gandhara and Western India after ca. AD 480 that was responsible for the end of this tradition? Verardi (2012: 158) names the period between AD 550 and 580 as of “severest duress for Gandharan Buddhists”. This was probably the time when some of the Gandharan Buddhist artists working in metal left the country for safer heavens in the East.

While the end of Buddhist metal casting in the wider Gandhara region outside Gilgit can be linked to the Hūnas and the lawless times following their dispersal, the beginning is less clear. Slusser (1975/76) has shown that Nepal metal work starts much earlier than previously expected. For Gandhara a clear definition of the beginnings seems to be missing, although there is one piece, known as the Nitta Buddha from its first collector, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which by some is regarded as the earliest preserved representation of the Buddha in cast metal. The status of “the oldest” was allotted in a paper of M. Carter (1985/86),¹⁶ where she compares the hairdo of this figure with the hairstyle of Augustus and the young Nero. Based on an assumed identity in style this piece is said to document the beginning of metal figures of the Buddha in the first or second century, an idea which found adherents (Behrendt 2007: 48; Siudmak 2013: 73). This comparison appears unwarranted and misleading¹⁷ and I have recently (Falk 2016: 35b) expressed my view that for technical reasons this beautiful little statue should be placed a good deal later than the second century.

With the Nitta Buddha gone the search for an earliest form of the Buddha is open again and will necessarily evoke the arguments brought forward by Cribb (1983; 1999/2000) showing that on the coinage of Kaniṣka I a standing Buddha is seen in a posture quite comparable to the one of the bronze statues. This is true, but all discussion is unsatisfying as

¹⁶ Siudmak (2013: 73) refers to “Carter 1988”, without a match in the References, but Behrendt (2007: 101) has Carter’s paper as dated to “1988” and seems to have provided the basis for Siudmak.

¹⁷ A look at the hairstyles in Carter 1985/86: 36+37 shows that Augustus and Nero comb their hair from the crane to the front, thus *ending* in short strands, parallel strands in the case of Nero. The Nitta Buddha, on the other hand, shows the hairstyle of a Brahma (cf. Mīrpur Khās) or yogi, with parallel strands *starting* at the front and being led upwards and banded together on the crane building a bushel of dreadlocks. Thus, any resemblance to the hairdo of the early Roman emperors disappears.

long as the impression is maintained that the coins depict statues and nothing but statues, metal or stone. The possibility that the die-engravers used paintings for their designs is ignored. There is one exceptionally great painting on silk from the time of and depicting Huviṣka (Marshak & Grenet 2006), clearly the result of a long artistic tradition; there is evidence of Kushan wall-painting (Carter 1997) of a non-Buddhist nature. Buddhas painted on a wall need to be highlighted and can receive golden aureoles and body mandorlas much easier on a wall painting than in stone or metal. All Buddha figures on Kaniṣka's gold coins have a body mandorla,¹⁸ while the stone-masons for a long time create nothing but head aureoles. There is not a single bronze statue with or without body mandorla inscribed in Kushan Brāhmī, while there are dozens of stone Buddhas and stone Bodhisattvas inscribed in Kushan Brāhmī with an aureole solely around their head. From this I conclude that the die-engraver worked from a painting, or the sketch of a painting, not from the sketch of a metal statue, and thus Kaniṣka's Buddha coinage loses much of its relevance for dating plastic art.

Returning to the London Buddha we can summarize that its home place, if not its place of production, most likely was in the regions around the upper Indus. The time of its production can only be given in a loose frame, from the late fourth to the middle of the sixth century AD. The artists skilled in shaping and casting such exceptional pieces of plastic art needed solvent customers, which after the Hūna disaster were found rather to the North and East.

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¹⁸. On gold coins the body mandorla is framed by the legend BOΔΔO on one side and the king's tamka on the other. When the name is enlarged to BOΔΔO / CAKAMANO or BOUΔO / MHTPAFO the tamka is regarded as more important and takes the place of the body mandorla.

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PLATE 4

Fig. 1. Front view with mandorla.



Fig. 2. Back view with mandorla.



Fig. 3. Side view with hand posture.



Fig. 4. Head with gem-stone tilak.



Fig. 5. The legend on eight lotus leaves.

